

# Cultural Competency in Theological Libraries

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Paper delivered at the Workshop on Library Services to Multicultural users at the 20th Annual Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association 8 July 2005, Center for Ministry, North Parramatta

## Background

I have recently returned from attending the American Theological Library Association's conference in Austin, Texas. One of the main impetuses for attending was that several sessions were built around the theme of 'Cultural competency in theological libraries'. The presenters at each session were theological librarians who at an earlier stage had 'sat on the other side of the fence' and experienced first hand some of the challenges of being students within the American educational system, that resulted from being from a non-white cultural group. These librarians described themselves as Japanese-American, Chinese-American, African-American, Hispanic, Mexican and Taiwanese.

Although the sessions were presented with a North American slant, I would like to share with you some of the main messages which had an impact on me.

Some of the questions discussed were:

Are there current practices in our institutions that work against diversity?  
How can we generate new ones that value diversity?  
Are there strategies we can take back to our institutions to generate a culture of respect for diversity?

## Culture

Culture has been defined as "the shared values, traditions, norms, customs, arts, history, folklore and institutions of a group of people". These can be racial, ethnic, religious or social groups.

Why should theological librarians be concerned about culture?

1. Understanding culture helps us to understand how others interpret their environment. We know that culture shapes how people see their world and how they function within that world. Culture shapes personal and group values and attitudes, including perceptions about what works and doesn't work, what is helpful and what is not, what makes sense and what does not.
2. Understanding culture helps service providers avoid stereotypes and biases that can undermine our efforts. It promotes a focus on the positive characteristics of a particular group and reflects an appreciation of cultural differences.

## Factors that influence culture

We know that cultural influences shape how individuals and groups create identifiable values, norms, symbols and ways of living that are transferred from one generation to another. Race and ethnicity are commonly thought to be dominant elements of culture, but a true definition of culture is actually much broader than this.

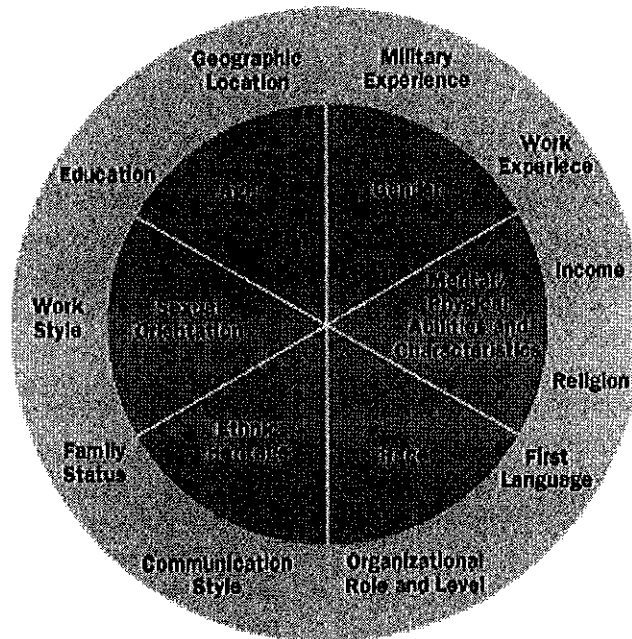
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## The Diversity Wheel

(from Implementing Diversity © 1996. Irwin Professional Publishing.)

This model illustrates both the primary and secondary dimensions of diversity that exert an impact on each of us at home, work and in society. While each dimension adds a layer of complexity to individual identity, it is the dynamic interaction among all the dimensions that influences self-image, values, opportunities and expectations. Together, the primary and secondary dimensions of diversity give definition and meaning to our lives by contributing to a synergistic, integrated whole -- the diverse person.



The model of the diversity wheel has been developed to illustrate the various dimensions that can contribute to the complexity of cultural diversity. It illustrates both the primary and secondary factors of diversity that exert an impact on each of us at home, work and in society. These dimensions of diversity contribute to the whole person.

Primary dimensions of diversity are age, ethnic heritage, gender, mental/physical abilities and characteristics, race and sexual orientation. These core dimensions exert an important impact on our experiences, values, assumptions and expectations throughout every stage of life.

Secondary dimensions include educational

level, income level, geographic residence, individual experiences, identification with community groups. These are generally less visible and many contain a greater element of choice.

Cultural competency is generally defined as "a set of congruent behaviours, attitudes and policies which are integrated into the practice methods of a system, agency or its professionals, that enables them to work effectively in cross-cultural situations".

When professionals are culturally competent, they establish positive helping relationships, and improve the quality of the services they provide.

There are five essential elements that contribute to a system's ability to become more culturally competent.

1. Valuing diversity + accepting and respecting differences.

The system should value diversity. You cannot begin to put in place the policies and procedures needed to become a culturally sensitive service if staff members do not value diversity.

2. Cultural self-assessment

The system should have the capacity for cultural self-assessment – in order to determine what you need to know, you must first know where you are.

3. Consciousness of the dynamics of cultural interactions

The system should be conscious of the dynamics that have occurred in the past when cultures interact and how these experiences may have been passed down between generations.

4. Institutionalization of cultural knowledge

The system should institutionalize cultural knowledge – this means that everyone in the organization needs to be culturally competent.

5. Adapting service delivery so that it reflects an understanding of the diversity between and within cultures.

The fifth element of cultural competency specifically focuses on changing activities to fit cultural norms.

There are many complex features inherent in communication, the environment and people's expectations. These can be major factors contributing to effective inclusive practice within a culturally diverse community. I have used the word 'communication' in preference to 'language' since much of the communication we need from others to make us feel good is not spoken at all.

Some suggestions and examples of how to be more culturally competent in Communication

### Speaking

- Need to explain library concepts clearly. Avoid jargon.
- Avoid complicated, long sentences and be careful about the use of humour, sarcasm and irony.
- Be aware of colloquial expressions and idioms.
- Establish appropriate modes of address and naming.
- Speak at a comfortable listening speed and volume. Remember shouting never increases understanding.
- Monitor speaking styles for clarity. Be aware of possible problems with accents.
- Face people when speaking.
- Use a respectful tone of verbal and non-verbal communication. Be aware that there may be an unconscious inclination to 'talk down' or to talk simplistically to international students or local students if English is not their first language.

### Listening

- Recognise that people who are using English as their second or third language can experience frustration and isolation from not being able to express themselves fully in English, especially when they are used to being highly successful in their own language and culture.
- It can also cause frustration for the listener who may have difficulty understanding the speaker.
- Listen to the words and try to picture what the speaker is trying to say, while being sensitive to feelings they are experiencing about speaking in English.
- If you don't understand, say you don't and ask the speaker to repeat what they said. Resist pretending to understand.
- Summarise or paraphrase what they are saying and if appropriate, reflect feelings by saying 'I understand what you need'.

### Understanding

- Make it a regular practice to check for understanding. Give permission to ask questions.

- Encourage people to be comfortable in saying 'I do not understand'.

### Non-verbal

Non-verbal communication is complex and no one is expected to be an expert.

- Indicate that you are giving the speaker your full attention. Adopt an open posture and perhaps lean slightly toward the speaker.
- Use open-handed gestures since in some cultures it is offensive to point.
- Lack of eye contact should not be equated with lack of attention as some cultural groups avoid direct eye contact as a sign of respect.
- Be aware of different amounts of body space since preferences for physical contact and proximity can vary.
- In some cultures 'yes' or a nod of the head might mean 'I hear you' but not necessarily 'I understand you'.
- Be aware that in some cultures, having women in positions of authority is not the norm.

Some other general observations that may enhance cultural competency

Avoid over generalizing behaviour (expecting particular culturally based behaviour from an individual because that person comes from a certain cultural group) or having stereotypical expectations of people (positive or negative). Try to identify assumptions that may be made about people. Physical appearances can be deceptive and identity with a particular culture does not necessarily imply identical life experiences.

A common observation when assisting

some people from alternate cultures is their reluctance to ask questions. There are many reasons contributing to the hesitancy to speak freely. Some people might not understand the need to ask, or may feel uncomfortable in doing so because they believe it is rude or because they lack the confidence to use English publicly. Others may have difficulty asking, because in their culture they are accustomed to being told everything on a 'need to know' basis. They may assume they have been given all the information they require and therefore will not ask for more.

Appreciate the challenges and stresses of adjusting to change. People can face challenges and adjustment stresses when they live and work in a new culture. Their familiar locations, customs, symbols of regular day-to-day life are taken from them. This is sometimes described as 'culture shock', i.e. when a person in a new culture finds that the unwritten rules that worked at home, no longer work. Their adjustment to change can be characterized by a series of phases which can influence perceptions and responses to others and to events around them. Students might experience initial euphoria at having arrived at theological college, but this can then be followed by bewilderment and uncertainty, discouragement and a yearning for home, perhaps ultimately even by depression.

Encourage the view that the library is a safe place and the library staff are persons with a sympathetic, listening ear. Take responsibility for familiarizing yourself with diverse cultures. Be aware of what may be happening back home which may be cause for anxiety. Make them welcome, convey the message that they are a person and we don't just provide resources for their academic study.

